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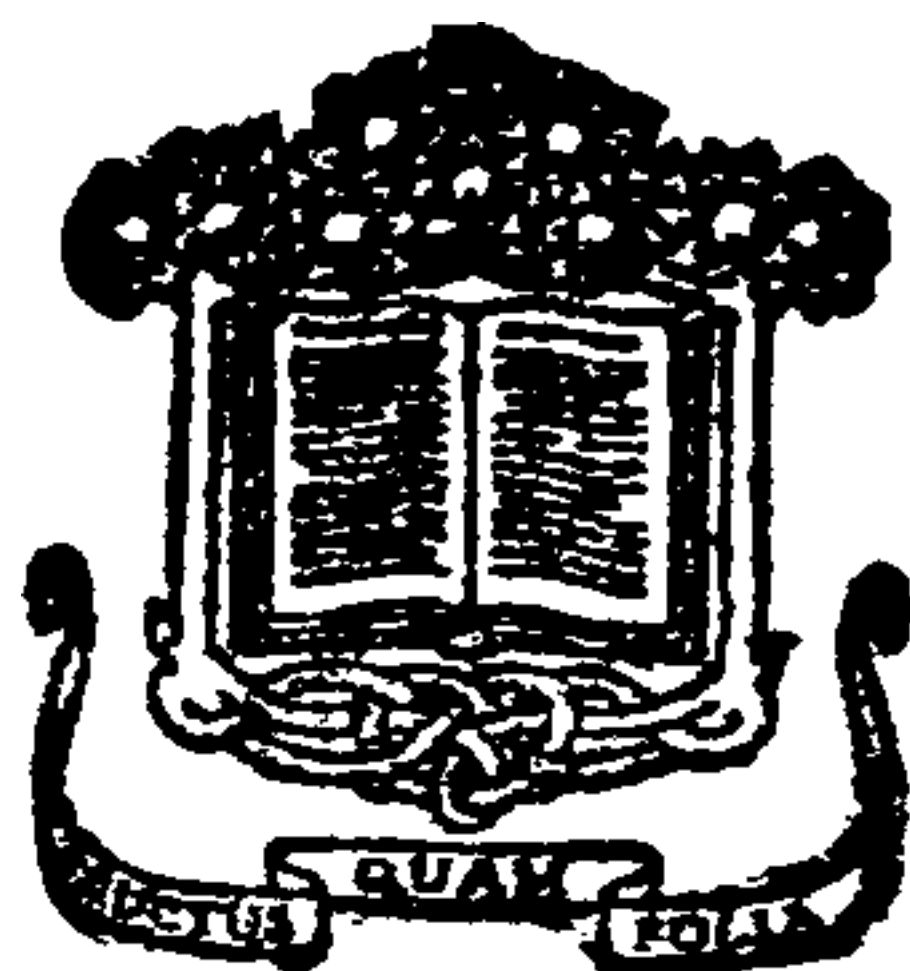
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PIANO PLAYING

A LITTLE BOOK OF SIMPLE SUGGESTIONS

BY

JOSEF HOFMANN



ILLUSTRATED

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TO MY DEAR FRIEND
CONSTANTIN VON STERNBERG

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A FOREWORD

THIS little book purposes to present a general view of artistic piano-playing and to offer to young students the results of such observations as I have made in the years of my own studies, as well as of the experiences which my public activity has brought me.

It is, of course, only the concrete, the material side of piano-playing that can be dealt with here—that part of it which aims to reproduce in tones what is plainly stated in the printed lines of a composition. The other, very much subtler part of piano-playing, draws upon and, indeed, depends upon imagination, refinement of sensibility, and spiritual vision, and endeavours to convey to an audience what the composer has, consciously or unconsciously, hidden *between* the lines. That almost entirely psychic side of piano-playing eludes treatment in literary form and must, therefore, not be

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looked for in this little volume. It may not be amiss, however, to dwell a moment upon these elusive matters of æsthetics and conception, though it be only to show how far apart they are from technic.

When the material part, the technic, has been completely acquired by the piano student, he will see a limitless vista opening up before him, disclosing the vast field of artistic interpretation. In this field the work is largely of an analytical nature and requires that intelligence, spirit, and sentiment, supported by knowledge and æsthetic perception, form a felicitous union to produce results of value and dignity. It is in this field that the student must learn to perceive the invisible something which unifies the seemingly separate notes, groups, periods, sections, and parts into an organic whole. The spiritual eye for this invisible something is what musicians have in mind when they speak of “reading between the lines”—which is at once the most fascinating and most difficult task of the interpretative artist; for, it is just between the lines where, in literature as in music, the soul of a work of art lies hid-

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den. To play its notes, even to play them correctly, is still very far from doing justice to the life and soul of an artistic composition.

I should like to reiterate at this point two words which I used in the second paragraph: the words “consciously or unconsciously.” A brief comment upon this alternative may lead to observations which may throw a light upon the matter of reading between the lines, especially as I am rather strongly inclining toward the belief in the “unconscious” side of the alternative.

I believe that every composer of talent (not to speak of genius) in his moments of creative fever has given birth to thoughts, ideas, designs that lay altogether beyond the reach of his conscious will and control. In speaking of the products of such periods we have hit upon exactly the right word when we say that the composer “has surpassed himself.” For, in saying this we recognise that the act of surpassing one’s self precludes the control of the self. A critical, sober overseeing of one’s work during the period of creation is unthinkable, for it is the fancy and the imagination that carries one

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on and on, will-lessly, driftingly, until the totality of the tonal apparition is completed and mentally as well as physically absorbed.

Now, inasmuch as the composer's conscious will takes little or no part in the creating of the work, it seems to follow that he is not, necessarily, an absolute authority as to the "only correct way" of rendering it. Pedantic adherence to the composer's own conception is, to my mind, not an unassailable maxim. The composer's way of rendering his composition may not be free from certain predilections, biases, mannerisms, and his rendition may also suffer from a paucity of pianistic experience. It seems, therefore, that to do justice to the work itself is of far greater importance than a slavish adherence to the composer's conception.

Now, to discover what it is, intellectually or emotionally, that hides itself between the lines; how to conceive and how to interpret it—that must ever rest with the reproductive artist, provided that he possesses not only the spiritual vision which entitles him to an individual conception, but also the technical skill to express what this individual conception (aided by

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imagination and analysis) has whispered to him. Taking these two conditions for granted, his interpretations — however punctiliously he adhere to the text—will and must be a reflex of his breeding, education, temperament, disposition; in short, of all the faculties and qualities that go to make up his personality. And as these personal qualities differ between players, their interpretations must, necessarily, differ in the same measure.

In some respects the performance of a piece of music resembles the reading of a book aloud to some one. If a book should be read to us by a person who does not understand it, would it impress us as true, convincing, or even credible? Can a dull person, by reading them to us, convey bright thoughts intelligibly? Even if such a person were drilled to read with outward correctness that of which he cannot fathom the meaning, the reading could not seriously engage our attention, because the reader's want of understanding would be sure to effect a lack of interest in us. Whatever is said to an audience, be the speech literary or musical, must be a free and individual expres-

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sion, governed only by general æsthetic laws or rules; it must be free to be artistic, and it must be individual to have vital force. Traditional conceptions of works of art are “canned goods,” unless the individual happens to concur with the traditional conception, which, at best, is very rarely the case and does not speak well for the mental calibre of the easily contented treader of the beaten path.

We know how precious a thing is freedom. But in modern times it is not only precious, it is also costly; it is based upon certain possessions. This holds as good in life as in art. To move comfortably with freedom in life requires money; freedom in art requires a sovereign mastery of technic. The pianist's artistic bank-account upon which he can draw at any moment is his technic. We do not gauge him by it as an artist, to be sure, but rather by the use he makes of it; just as we respect the wealthy according to the way in which they use their money. And as there are wealthy people that are vulgar, so there may be pianists who, despite the greatest technic, are not artists. Still, while money is to a gentleman perhaps no

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more than a rather agreeable adjunct, technic is to the pianist's equipment an indispensable necessity.

To assist young students in acquiring this necessity, the following articles were written for *The Ladies' Home Journal*, and for this form I have gone over them and corrected and amplified. I sincerely hope that they will help my young colleagues to become free as piano-playing musicians first, and that this, in its turn and with the help of good fortune in their career, will bring them the means to make them equally free in their daily life.

JOSEF HOFMANN.

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THE PIANO AND ITS PLAYER

THE first requisite for one who wishes to become a musicianly and artistic pianist is a precise knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of the piano as an instrument. Having properly recognised them both, having thus staked off a stretch of ground for his activity, he must explore it to discover all the resources for tonal expression that are hidden within its pale. With these resources, however, he must be contented. He must, above all, never strive to rival the orchestra. For there is no necessity to attempt anything so foolish and so futile, since the gamut of expressions inherent to the piano is quite extensive enough to vouchsafe artistic results of the very highest order, provided, of course, that this gamut is used in an artistic manner.

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THE PIANO AND THE ORCHESTRA

From one point of view the piano can claim to be the equal of the orchestra; namely, in so far as it is—no less than the orchestra—the exponent of a specific branch of music which, complete by itself, reposes upon a literature exclusively its own and of a type so distinguished that only the orchestra can claim to possess its peer. The great superiority of the literature of the piano over that of any other single instrument has, to my knowledge, never been disputed. I think it is equally certain that the piano grants to its players a greater freedom of expression than any other instrument; greater — in certain respects — than even the orchestra, and very much greater than the organ, which, after all, lacks the intimate, personal element of “touch” and the immediateness of its variegated results.

In dynamic and colouristic qualities, on the other hand, the piano cannot bear comparison with the orchestra; for in these qualities it is very limited indeed. The prudent player will not go beyond these limits. The utmost that

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the pianist can achieve in the way of colour may be likened to what the painters call "monochrome." For in reality the piano, like any other instrument, has only one colour; but the artistic player can subdivide the colour into an infinite number and variety of shades. The virtue of a specific charm, too, attaches as much to the piano as to other instruments, though, perhaps, in a lesser degree of sensuousness than to some others. Is it because of this lesser sensuous charm that the art of the piano is considered the chastest of all instruments? I am rather inclined to think that it is, partly at least, due to this chastity that it "wears" best, that we can listen longer to a piano than to other instruments, and that this chastity may have had a reflex action upon the character of its unparagoned literature.

For this literature, though, we have to thank the pianists themselves, or, speaking more precisely, we are indebted to the circumstance that the piano is the only single instrument capable of conveying the complete entity of a composition. That melody, bass, harmony, figuration, polyphony, and the most intricate contrapun-

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tal devices can—by skilful hands—be rendered simultaneously and (to all intents and purposes) completely on the piano has probably been the inducement which persuaded the great masters of music to choose it as their favourite instrument.

It may be mentioned at this point that the piano did not have the effect of impairing the orchestration of the great composers—as some musical wiseacres assert from time to time—for they have written just as fine works for a variety of other instruments, not to speak of their symphonies. Thus has, for instance, the most substantial part of the violin literature been contributed by piano-players (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bruch, Saint-Saëns, Tschaikowski, and many others). As to the literature of the orchestra, it came almost exclusively from those masters whose only, or chiefest, medium of musical utterance was the piano. Highly organised natures, as they were, they liked to dress their thoughts, sometimes, in the colour splendour of the orchestra. Looking at the depth of their piano works, however, at their sterling merit, at their

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poetry, I feel that even a refined musical nature may find lifelong contentment in the piano—despite its limitations—if, as I said before, the artist keeps within its boundaries and commands its possibilities. For it is, after all, not so very little that the piano has to offer. It is both governed and manipulated by one and the same mind and person; its mechanism is so fine and yet so simple as to make its tone response quite as direct as that of any other stringed instrument; it admits of the thoroughly personal element of touch; it requires no auxiliary instruments (for even in the Concerto the orchestra is not a mere accompanist but an equal partner, as the name “Concerto” implies); its limitations are not as bad as those of some other instruments or of the voice; it outweighs these limitations very fairly by the vast wealth of its dynamic and touch varieties. Considering all these and many other points of merit, I think that a musician may be pretty well satisfied with being a pianist. His realm is in more than one respect smaller than that of the conductor, to be sure, but on the other hand the conductor loses many lovely moments

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of sweet intimacy which are granted to the pianist when, world-oblivious and alone with his instrument he can commune with his innermost and best self. Consecrated moments, these, which he would exchange with no musician of any other type and which wealth can neither buy nor power compel.

THE PIANO AND THE PLAYER

Music makers are, like the rest of mankind, not free from sin. On the whole, however, I think that the transgressions of pianists against the canons of art are less grave and less frequent than those of other music makers; perhaps, because they are — usually — better grounded as musicians than are singers and such players of other instruments as the public places on a par with the pianists I have in mind. But, while their sins may be less in number and gravity—let it be well understood that the pianists are no saints. Alas, no! It is rather strange, though, that their worst misdeeds are induced by that very virtue of the piano of requiring no auxiliary instruments, of being independent. If it were not so; if the pianist

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were compelled always to play in company with other musicians, these other players might at times differ with him as to conception, tempo, etc., and their views and wishes should have to be reckoned with, for the sake of both equilibrium and—sweet peace.

Left entirely to himself, however, as the pianist usually is in his performances, he sometimes yields to a tendency to move altogether too freely, to forget the deference due to the composition and its creator, and to allow his much-beloved “individuality” to glitter with a false and presumptuous brightness. Such a pianist does not only fail in his mission as an interpreter but he also misjudges the possibilities of the piano. He will, for instance, try to produce six *forte-s* when the piano has not more than three to give, all told, except at a sacrifice of its dignity and its specific charm.

The extremest contrasts, the greatest *forte* and the finest *piano*, are given factors determined by the individual piano, by the player's skill of touch, and by the acoustic properties of the hall. These given factors the pianist must bear in mind, as well as the limitations of the

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piano as to colour, if he means to keep clear of dilettanteism and charlatanry. A nice appreciation of the realm over which he rules, as to its boundaries and possibilities, must be the supreme endeavour of every sovereign—hence also of every sovereign musician.

Now, I hear it so often said of this and that pianist that “he plays with *so much feeling*” that I cannot help wondering if he does not, sometimes at least, play with “*so much feeling*” where it is not in the least called for and where “*so much feeling*” constitutes a decided trespass against the æsthetic boundaries of the composition. My apprehension is usually well founded, for the pianist that plays *everything* “with *so much feeling*” is an artist in name only, but in reality a sentimentalist, if not a vulgar sensationalist or a ranter upon the keyboard. What sane pianist would, for instance, attempt to play a cantilena with the same appealing sensuousness as the most mediocre ‘cellist can do with the greatest ease? Yet many pianists attempt it; but since they are fully aware that they can never attain such ends by legitimate, artistic means, they make either the

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accompaniment or the rhythm, if not the phrasing, bear the brunt of their palpable diletanteism. Of such illusory endeavours I cannot warn too strongly, for they are bound to destroy the organic relation of the melody to its auxiliaries and to change the musical “physiognomy” of a piece into a—“grimace.” This fault reveals that the pianist’s spirit—of adventure—is too willing, but the flesh—of the fingers and their technic—too weak.

The artistic and the dilettantic manners of expression must be sharply differentiated. They differ, principally, as follows: the artist knows and feels how far the responsiveness of his instrument, at any particular part of his piece, will allow him to go without violating æsthetics, and without stepping outside of the nature of his instrument. He shapes his rendition of the piece accordingly and practises wise economy in the use of force and in the display of feeling. As to feeling, *per se*, it is the ripe product of a multitude of æsthetic processes which the moment creates and develops; but the artist will keep this product from asserting itself until he has complied with every re-

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quirement of artistic *workmanship*; until he has, so to speak, provided a cleanly covered and fully set table upon which these matters of “feeling” appear as finishing, decorative touches, say, as flowers.

The dilettante, on the other hand, does not consume any time by thinking and planning; he simply “goes for” his piece and, without bothering about workmanship or squirming around it as best he may, he rambles off into —“feeling,” which in his case consists of naught but vague, formless, aimless, and purely sensuous sentimentality. His accompaniment drowns the melody, his rhythm goes on a sympathetic strike, dynamic and other artistic properties become hysterical; no matter, he — “feels”! He builds a house in which the cellar is under the roof and the garret in the basement.

Let it be said in extenuation of such a player that he is not always and seldom wholly to blame for his wrong-doing. Very often he strays from the path of musical rectitude because of his misplaced trust in the judgment of others, which causes him to accept and follow advice

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in good faith, instead of duly considering its source. For, under certain conditions, the advice of even a connoisseur may be wrong. Many professional and well-equipped critics, for instance, fall into the bad habit of expecting that a pianist should tell all he knows in every piece he plays, whether the piano does or does not furnish the opportunities for displaying all his qualities. They expect him to show strength, temperament, passion, poise, sentiment, repose, depth, and so forth, in the first piece on his programme. He must tell his whole story, present himself at once as a “giant” or “Titan” of the piano, though the piece may call for naught but tenderness. With this demand, or the alternative of a “roasting,” public artists are confronted rather frequently. Nor is this, perhaps, as much the fault of the critic as of the conditions under which they must write. From my own experience and that of others I know that the critics in large cities are so overburdened with work during the season that they have seldom time to listen to more than one piece out of a whole recital programme. After such a mere sample they form

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their opinions—so momentous for the career of a young pianist—and if this one piece happened to offer no opportunities to the pianist to show himself as the “great” So-and-so, why, then he is simply put down as one of the “littlefellows.” It is no wonder that such conditions tempt many young aspirants to public renown to resort to æsthetic violence in order to make sure of “good notices”; to use power where it is not called for; to make “feeling” ooze from every pore; to double, treble the tempo or vacillate it out of all rhythm; to violate the boundaries of both the composition and the instrument—and all this for no other purpose than to show as quickly as possible that the various qualities are “all there.” These conditions produce what may be called the pianistic nouveau-riche or parvenu, who practises the vices of the dilettante without, however, the mitigating excuse of ignorance or a lack of training.

THE PIANIST AND THE COMPOSITION

As the piano, so has also every composition its limitations as to the range of its emotions

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and their artistic expression. The hints in this direction I threw out before may now be amplified by discussing a very common error which underlies the matter of conception. It is the error of inferring the conception of a composition *from the name of its composer*; of thinking that Beethoven has to be played thus and Chopin thus. No error could be greater!

True, every great composer has his own style, his habitual mode of thought development, his personality revealing lines. But it is equally true that the imagination of all great composers was strong enough to absorb them as completely in their own creation as the late Pygmalion was absorbed in his Galatea, and to lure them, for the time being, completely away from their habits of thought and expression; they become the willing servants of the new creature of their own fancy. Thus we find some of Beethoven's works as romantic and fanciful as any of Schumann's or Chopin's could be, while some of the latter's works show at times a good deal of Beethovenish classicity. It is, therefore, utterly wrong to approach

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every work of Beethoven with the preconceived idea that it must be “deep” and “majestic,” or, if the work be Chopin’s, that it must run over with sensuousness and “feeling.” How would such a style of rendition do, for instance, for the Polonaise op. 53, or even for the little one in A, op. 40, No. 1? On the other hand, how would the stereotype, academic manner of playing Beethoven suit his Concerto in G—that poetic presage of Chopin?

Every great master has written some works that are, and some that are not, typical of himself. In the latter cases the master’s identity reveals itself only to an eye that is experienced enough to detect it in the smaller, more minute traits of his style. Such delicate features, however, must be left in their discreet nooks and niches; they must not be clumsily dragged into the foreground for the sake of a traditional rendition of the piece. That sort of “reverence” is bound to obliterate all the peculiarities of the particular, non-typical composition. It is not reverence, but fetichism. Justice to the composer means justice to his works; to every work in particular. And this justice we cannot

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learn from the reading of his biography, but by regarding every one of his works as a separate and complete entity; as a perfect, organic whole of which we must study the general character, the special features, the form, the manner of design, the emotional course, and the trend of thought. Much more than by his biography we will be helped, in forming our conception, by comparing the work in hand with others of the same master, though the comparison may disclose just as many differences of style as it may show similarities.

The worship of names, the unquestioning acquiescence in traditional conceptions—those are not the principles which will lead an artist to come into his own. It is rather a close examination of every popular notion, a severe testing of every tradition by the touchstone of self-thinking that will help an artist to find himself and to see, what he does see, with his own eyes.

Thus we find that—in a certain constructive meaning—even the reverence for the composer is not without boundaries; though these boundary lines are drawn here only to secure the

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widest possible freedom for their work.
Goethe's great word expresses most tersely
what I mean:

Outwardly limited,
Boundless to inward.

GENERAL RULES

SUCCESSFUL piano-playing, if it cannot be entirely acquired by some very simple rules, can, at least, be very much helped by what will seem to some as contributing causes so slight as to be hardly worth notice. Still, they are immensely valuable, and I will endeavour to set down a few.

The Value of the Morning Hour above any other time is not generally appreciated. The mental freshness gained from sleep is a tremendous help. I go so far as to say play away for an hour, or a half hour even, before breakfast. But before you touch the piano let me suggest one very prosaic little hint: wash the keyboard as clean as you did your hands. Eating always tastes best from a clean table. Just so with the piano: you cannot do clean work on an unclean keyboard.

Now, as to Practice: Let me suggest that you never practise more than an hour, or, at

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the most, two hours, at a stretch—according to your condition and strength. Then go out and take a walk, and think no more of music. This method of mental unhitching, so to speak, is absolutely necessary in order that the newly acquired results of your work may—unconsciously to yourself—mature in your mind and get, as it were, into your flesh and blood. That which you have newly learned must become affixed to your entire organism, very much like the picture on a photographic plate is developed and affixed by the silver bath. If you allow Nature no time for this work the result of your previous efforts will vanish and you will have to begin all over again with your—photographing. Yes, photographing! For every acoustic or tone picture is, through the agency of the ear, photographed in the brain, and the whole occupation of the pianist consists in the reproduction of the previously received impressions through the fingers, which, with the help of the instrument, retranslate the pictures into audible tones.

After every half hour make a pause until you feel rested. Five minutes will often be suf-



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ficient. Follow the example of the painter, who closes his eyes for a few moments in order to obtain upon reopening them a fresh color impression.

A Valuable Little Hint Here, if you will allow me: Watch well that you actually hear every tone you mean to produce. Every missing tone will mean a blotch upon your photographic plate in the brain. Each note must be, not mentally but physically, heard, and to this imperative requirement your speed must ever subordinate itself. It is not at all necessary to practise loudly in order to foster the permanence of impressions. Rather let an inward tension take the place of external force. It will engage, sympathetically, your hearing just as well.

As to the Theory—great energy, great results—I prefer my amended version: great energy, restrained power and moderate manifestation of it. Prepare the finger for great force, imagine the tone as being strong, and yet strike moderately. Continuous loud playing makes our playing coarse. On the other hand, continuous soft playing will blur the tone picture in

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our mind and cause us soon to play insecurely and wrongly. From time to time we should, of course, practise loudly so as to develop physical endurance. But for the greater part of practice I recommend playing with restrained power. And, incidentally, your neighbours will thank you for it, too.

Do Not Practise Systematically, or “methodically,” as it is sometimes called. Systematism is the death of spontaneousness, and spontaneousness is the very soul of art. If you play every day at the same time the same sequence of the same studies and the same pieces, you may acquire a certain degree of skill, perhaps, but the spontaneity of your rendition will surely be lost. Art belongs to the realm of emotional manifestations, and it stands to reason that a systematic exploiting of our emotional nature must blunt it.

With Regard to Finger Exercises: Do not let them be too frequent or too long—at the most a half hour a day. A half hour daily, kept up for a year, is enough for any one to learn to play one’s exercises. And if one can play them why should one keep everlastingly on

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playing them? Can anybody explain, without reflecting upon one's sanity, why one should persist in playing them? I suggest to use these exercises as "preliminary warmers" (as practised in engines). As soon as the hands have become warm and elastic, or pliable—"played in," as we pianists say—drop the exercises and repeat them for the same purpose the next morning, if you will. They can be successfully substituted, however. As compositions they are but lukewarm water. If you will dip your hands, instead, for five minutes into hot water you will follow my own method and find it just as efficacious.

A Rule for Memory Exercises: If you wish to strengthen the receptivity and retentiveness of your memory you will find the following plan practical: Start with a short piece. Analyse the form and manner of its texture. Play the piece a number of times very exactly with the music before you. Then stop playing for several hours and try to trace the course of ideas mentally in the piece. Try to hear the piece inwardly. If you have retained some parts refill the missing places by repeated read-

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ing of the piece, away from the piano. When next you go to the piano—after several hours, remember—try to play the piece. Should you still get “stuck” at a certain place take the sheet music, but play only that place (several times, if necessary), and then begin the piece over again, as a test, if you have better luck this time with those elusive places. If you still fail resume your silent reading of the piece away from the piano. Under no circumstances skip the unsafe place for the time being, and proceed with the rest of the piece. By such forcing of the memory you lose the logical development of your piece, tangle up your memory and injure its receptivity. Another observation in connection with memorising may find a place here. When we study a piece we—unconsciously—associate in our mind a multitude of things with it which bear not the slightest relation upon it. By these “things” I mean not only the action of the piano, light or heavy, as it may be, but also the colour of its wood, the colour of the wall paper, discoloration of the ivory on some key of the piano, the pictures on the walls, the angle at which the piano stands

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to the architectural lines of the room, in short, all sorts of things. And we remain utterly unconscious of having associated them with the piece we are studying—until we try to play the well-learned piece in a different place, in the house of a friend or, if we are inexperienced enough to commit such a blunder, in the concert hall. Then we find that our memory fails us most unexpectedly, and we blame our memory for its unreliableness. But the fact is rather that our memory was only too good, too exact, for the absence of or difference from our accustomed surroundings disturbed our too precise memory. Hence, to make absolutely sure of our memory we should try our piece in a number of different places before relying upon our memory; this will dissociate the wonted environment from the piece in our memory.

With Regard to Technical Work: Play good compositions and construe out of them your own technical exercises. In nearly every piece you play you will find a place or two of which your conscience tells you that they are not up to your own wishes; that they can be improved upon either from a rhythmical, dynam-

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ical or precisional point of view. Give these places the preference for a while, but do not fail to play from time to time again the whole piece in order to put the erstwhile defective and now repaired part into proper relation to its context. Remember that a difficult part may “go” pretty well when severed from its context and yet fail utterly when attempted in its proper place. You must follow the mechanic in this. If a part of a machine is perfected in the shop it must still go through the process of being “mounted”—that is, being brought into proper relation to the machine itself—and this often requires additional packing or filing, as the case may be. This “mounting” of a repaired part is done best by playing it in conjunction with one preceding and one following measure; then put two measures on each side, three, four, etc., until you feel your ground safely under your fingers. Not until then have you achieved your purpose of technical practice. The mere mastering of a difficulty *per se* is no guarantee of success whatever. Many students play certain compositions for years, and yet when they are asked to play them the evi-

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cences of imperfection are so palpable that they cannot have finished the learning of them.

The strong probability is that they never will finish the "study" of them, because they do not study right.

As to the Number of Pieces: The larger the number of good compositions you are able to play in a finished manner, the better grow your opportunities to develop your versatility of style; for in almost every good composition you will find some traits peculiar to itself only which demand an equally special treatment. To keep as many pieces as possible in your memory and in good technical condition, play them a few times each week. Do not play them, however, in consecutive repetitions. Take one after the other. After the last piece is played the first one will appear fresh again to your mind. This process I have tested and found very helpful in maintaining a large repertory.

Play Always with the Fingers—that is, move your arms as little as possible and hold them—and the shoulder muscles—quite loosely. The hands should be nearly horizontal, with a slight inclination from the elbows toward the

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keys. Bend the fingers gently and endeavour to touch the keys in their centre and with the tips of the fingers. This will tend toward sureness and give eyes to your fingers, so to speak.

The Practice of Finger Octaves: Play octaves first as if you were playing single notes with one finger of each hand. Lift the thumb and fifth finger rather high and let them fall upon the keys without using the wrist. Later let the wrist come to your aid, sometimes even the arm and shoulder muscles, though the latter should both be reserved for places requiring great power.

Where powerful octaves occur in long continuation it is best to distribute the work over the joints and muscles of the fingers, wrists, and shoulders. With a rational distribution each of the joints will avoid over-fatigue and the player will gain in endurance. This applies, of course, only to bravura passages. In places where musical characteristics predominate the player does best to choose whichever of these sources of touch seems most appropriate.

About Using the Pedal: Beware of too frequent and—above all—of long-continued use



Incorrect Way to Play an Octave



Correct Way to Play an Octave

GENERAL RULES

of the pedal. It is the mortal enemy of clarity. Judiciously, however, you should use it when you study a new work, for if you accustom yourself to play a work without the pedal the habit of non-pedalling will grow upon you, and you will be surprised to find later how your feet can be in the way of your fingers. Do not delay the use of the pedal as if it were the desert after a repast.

Never Play with a Metronome: You may use a metronome for a little passage as a test of your ability to play the passage in strict time. When you see the result, positive or negative, stop the machine at once. For according to the metronome a really musical rhythm is unrhythmical—and, on the other hand, the keeping of absolutely strict time is thoroughly unmusical and deadlike.

You should endeavour to reproduce the sum-total of the time which a musical thought occupies. Within its scope, however, you must vary your beats in accordance with their musical significance. This constitutes in musical interpretation what I call the individual pulse-beat which imparts life to the dead, black notes.

PIANO PLAYING

Beware, however, of being too “individual”! Avoid exaggeration, or else your patient will grow feverish and all æsthetic interpretation goes to the happy hunting grounds!

The Correct Posture at the Piano: Sit straight before the piano but not stiff. Have both feet upon the pedals, so as to be at any moment ready to use them. All other manners to keep the feet are—bad manners. Let your hand fall with the arm upon the keyboard when you start a phrase, and observe a certain roundness in all the motions of your arms and hands. Avoid angles and sharp bends, for they produce strong frictions in the joints, which means a waste of force and is bound to cause premature fatigue.

Do Not Attend Poor Concerts. Do not believe that you can learn correct vision from the blind, nor that you can really profit by hearing how a piece should *not* be played, and then trying the reverse. The danger of getting accustomed to poor playing is very great. What would you think of a parent who deliberately sent his child into bad company in order that such child should learn how *not* to behave?

GENERAL RULES

Such experiments are dangerous. By attending poor concerts you encourage the bungler to continue in his crimes against good taste and artistic decency, and you become his accomplice. Besides, you help to lower the standard of appreciation in your community, which may sink so low that good concerts will cease to be patronised. If you desire that good concerts should be given in your city the least you can do is to withhold your patronage from bad ones. If you are doubtful as to the merits of a proposed concert ask your own or your children's music teacher. He will appreciate your confidence and be glad of the opportunity to serve you for once in a musical matter that lies on a higher plane than your own or your children's music lesson.

To Those Who Play in Public I should like to say this: Before you have played a composition in public two or three times you must not expect that every detail of it shall go according to your wishes. Do not be surprised at little unexpected occurrences. Consider that the acoustic properties of the various halls constitute a serious danger to the musician. Bad

PIANO PLAYING

humor on your part, or a slight indisposition, even a clamlike audience, Puritanically austere or cool from diffidence—all these things can be overcome; but the acoustic properties remain the same from the beginning of your programme to its end, and if they are not a kindly counsellor they turn into a fiendish demon who sneers to death your every effort to produce noble-toned pictures. Therefore, try to ascertain, as early as possible, what sort of an architectural stomach your musical feast is to fill, and then—well, do the best you can. Approach the picture you hold in your mind as nearly as circumstances permit.

When I Find Bad Acoustics in a Hall. An important medium of rectifying the acoustic misbehaviour of a hall I have found in the pedal. In some halls my piano has sounded as if I had planted my feet on the pedal for good and ever; in such cases I practised the greatest abstention from pedalling. It is a fact that we have to treat the pedal differently in almost every hall to insure the same results. I know that a number of books have been written on the use of the pedal, but they are theories which

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tumble down before the first adverse experience on the legitimate concert stage. There you can lean on nothing but experience.

About Reading Books on Music. And speaking of books on music, let me advise you to read them, but not to believe them unless they support every statement with an argument, and unless this argument succeeds in convincing you. In art we deal far oftener with exceptions than with rules and laws. Every genius in art has demonstrated in his works the forefeeling of new laws, and every succeeding one has done by his precursors as his successors have in their turn done by him. Hence all theorising in art must be problematic and precarious, while dogmatising in art amounts to absurdity. Music is a language—the language of the musical, whatever and wherever be their country. Let each one, then, speak in his own way, as he thinks and feels, provided he is sincere. Tolstoi put the whole thing so well when he said: “There are only three things of real importance in the world. They are: Sincerity! Sincerity! Sincerity!”

CORRECT TOUCH AND TECHNIC

GREAT finger technic may be defined as extreme precision and great speed in the action of the fingers. The latter quality, however, can never be developed without the legato touch. I am convinced that the degree of perfection of finger technic is exactly proportionate to the development of the legato touch. The process of the non-legato touch, by showing contrary results, will bear me out. To play a rapid run non-legato will consume much more time than to play it legato because of the lifting of the fingers between the tones. In playing legato the fingers are not lifted off the keys, but—hardly losing contact with the ivory—glide sideways to the right or the left as the notes may call for it. This, naturally, saves both time and exertion, and thus allows an increase of speed.

How is the true legato accomplished? By the gliding motion just mentioned, and by

CORRECT TOUCH

touching the next following key before the finger which played last has fully abandoned its key. To illustrate, let me say that in a run of single notes two fingers are simultaneously at work—the “played” and the “playing” one; in runs of double notes (thirds, sixths, etc.) the number of simultaneously employed fingers is, analogously, four. Only in this manner is a true legato touch to be attained. While the fingers are in action the hand must not move lest it produce gaps between the succeeding tones, causing not only a breaking of the connection between them but also a lessening of speed. The transfer of the hand should take place only when the finger is already in touch with the key that is to follow—not at the time of contact, still less before.

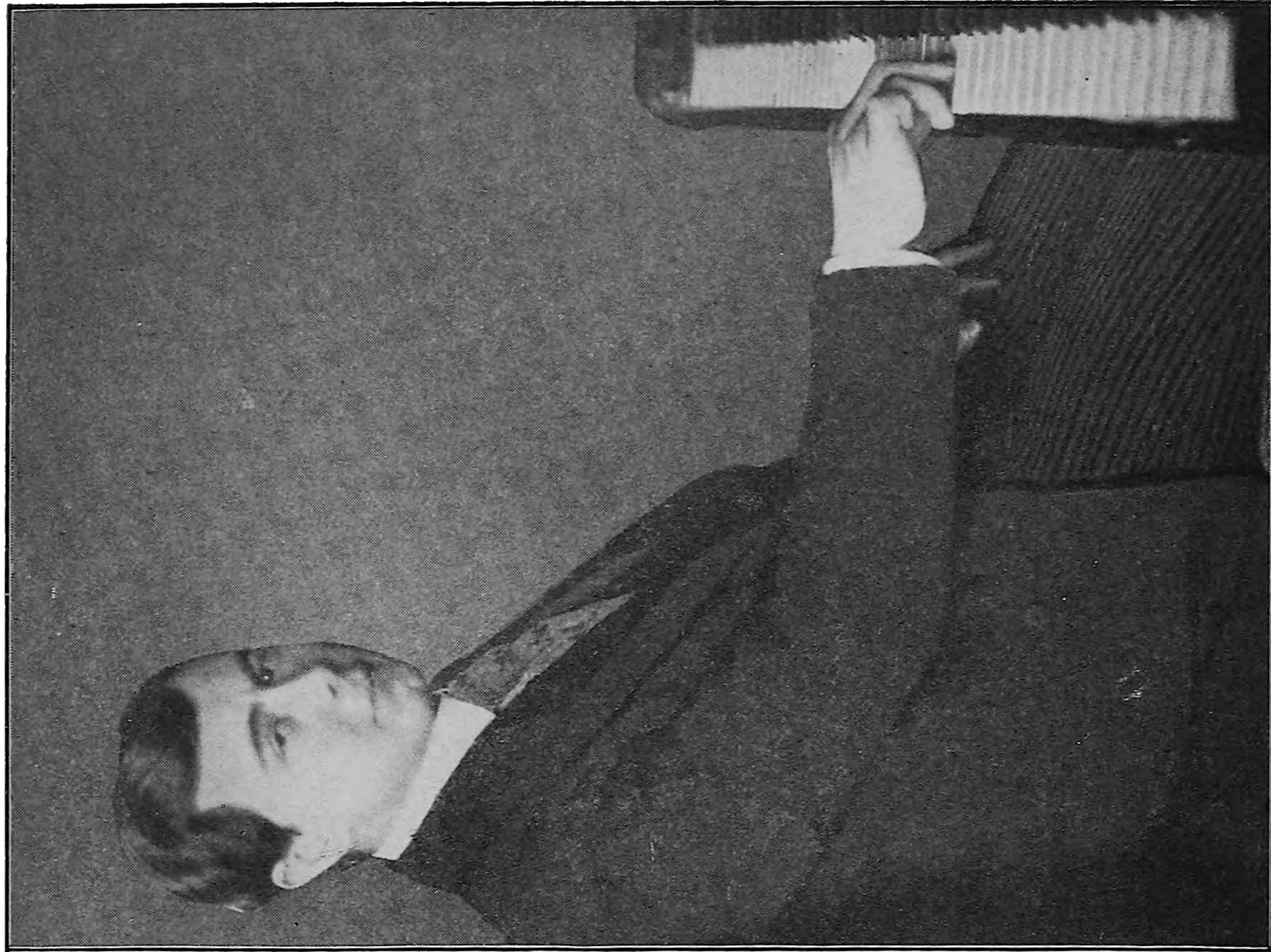
The selection of a practical fingering is, of course, of paramount importance for a good legato touch. In attempting a run without a good fingering we will soon find ourselves “out of fingers.” In that emergency we should have to resort to “piecing on,” and this means a jerk at every instance—equal to a non-legato. A correct fingering is one which permits the long-

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est natural sequel of fingers to be used without a break. By earnest thinking every player can contrive the fingering that will prove most convenient to him. But, admitting that the great diversity of hands prohibits a universal fingering, all the varieties of fingering ought to be based upon the principle of a natural sequel. If a player be puzzled by certain configurations of notes and keys as to the best fingering for them, he ought to consult a teacher, who, if a good one, will gladly help him out.

Precision, the other component part of finger technic, is intimately related with the player's general sense of orderliness. As a matter of fact, precision *is* orderliness in the technical execution of a musical prescription. If the student will but look quite closely at the piece he is learning; if he has the patience to repeat a difficult place in it a hundred times if necessary—and correctly, of course—he will soon acquire the trait of precision and he will experience the resultant increase in his technical ability.

Mental technic presupposes the ability to form a clear inward conception of a run with-



Photograph by Byron

Incorrect Position of Little Finger

Correct Position of Little Finger

C O R R E C T T O U C H

out resorting to the fingers at all. Since every action of a finger has first to be determined upon by the mind, a run should be completely prepared mentally before it is tried on the piano. In other words, the student should strive to acquire the ability to form the tonal picture in his mind, rather than the note picture.

The tonal picture dwells in our imagination. This acts upon the responsive portions of the brain, influences them according to its own intensity, and this influence is then transferred to the motoric nerve-centres which are concerned in music-making. As far as known this is the course by which the musician converts his musical concept into a tonal reality. Hence, when studying a new work, it is imperative that a tonal picture of perfect clarity should be prepared in the mind before the mechanical (or technical) practicing begins. In the earlier stages of cultivating this trait it will be best to ask the teacher to play the piece for us, and thus to help us in forming a correct tonal picture in our mind.

The blurring of the tonal picture produces a temporary (don't get frightened!) paral-

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ysis of the motoric centres which control the fingers. Every pianist knows—unfortunately—the sensation of having his fingers begin to “stick” as if the keys were covered with fly-paper, and he knows, also, that this sensation is but a warning that the fingers are going on a general and even “sympathetic” strike—sympathetic, because even the momentarily unconcerned fingers participate in it. Now the cause of this sensation lies not in a defective action of the fingers themselves, but solely in the mind. It is there that some undesired change has taken place, a change which impairs the action of the fingers. The process is like this: by quick repetitions of complicated figures, slight errors, slips, flaws escape our notice; the more quick repetitions we make the larger will be the number of these tiny blots, and this must needs lead finally to a completely distorted tonal picture. This distortion, however, is not the worst feature. Inasmuch as we are very likely not to make the same little blunders at every repetition the tonal picture becomes confused, blurred. The nerve contacts which cause the fingers to act become unde-



Incorrect Position of Thumb



Correct Position of Thumb

CORRECT TOUCH

cided first, then they begin to fail more and more, until they cease altogether and the fingers—stick! At such a juncture the student should at once resort to slow practice. He should play the defective place clearly, orderly, and, above all, slowly, and persist in this course until the number of correct repetitions proves sufficient to crowd the confused tonal picture out of the mind. This is not to be regarded as mechanical practice, for it is intended for the rehabilitation of a disarranged or disturbed mental concept. I trust this will speak for the practice of what I called “mental technic.” Make the mental tonal picture sharp; the fingers must and will obey it.

We are sometimes affected by “thought-laziness”—I translate this word literally from other languages, because it is a good compound for which I can find no better equivalent in English. Whenever we find the fingers going astray in the piece we play we might as well admit to ourselves that the trouble is in the main office. The mysterious controlling officer has been talking with a friend instead of attending to business. The mind was not keep-

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ing step with the fingers. We have relied on our automatism; we allowed the fingers to run on and the mind lagged behind, instead of being, as it should be, ahead of the fingers, preparing their work.

Quick musical thinking, the importance of which is thus apparent, cannot be developed by any direct course. It is one of the by-products of the general widening of one's musical horizon. It is ever proportionate to the growth of one's other musical faculties. It is the result of elasticity of the mind acquired or developed by constant, never-failing, unremitting employment whenever we are at the piano. A procedure tending directly toward developing quick musical thinking is, therefore, not necessary.

The musical will has its roots in the natural craving for musical utterance. It is the director-in-chief of all that is musical in us. Hence I recognise in the purely technical processes of piano-playing no less a manifestation of the musical will. But a technic without a musical will is a faculty without a purpose, and when it becomes a purpose in itself it can never serve art.

THE USE OF THE PEDAL

TO speak in a concrete manner of the pedal is possible only on the basis of a complete understanding of the fundamental principle underlying its use. The reader must agree to the governing theory that the organ which governs the employment of the pedal is—the ear! As the eye guides the fingers when we read music, so must the ear be the guide—and the “sole” guide—of the foot upon the pedal. The foot is merely the servant, the executive agent, while the ear is the guide, the judge, and the final criterion. If there is any phase in piano-playing where we should remember particularly that music is for the ear it is in the treatment of the pedal. Hence, whatever is said here in the following lines with regard to the pedal must be understood as resting upon the basis of this principle.

As a general rule I recommend pressing the lever or treadle down with a quick, definite, full motion and always immediately after—

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mark me, after—the striking of the keys, never simultaneously with the stroke of the fingers, as so many erroneously assume and do. To prevent a cacophonous mixture of tones we should consider that we must stop the old tone before we can give pedal to the new one, and that, in order to make the stopping of the past tone perfect, we must allow the damper to press upon the vibrating strings long enough to do its work. If, however, we tread down exactly with the finger-stroke we simply inhibit this stopping, because the damper in question is lifted again before it has had time to fall down. (In speaking of the dampers as moving up and down I have in mind the action of the “grand” piano; in the upright piano the word “off” must be substituted for “up,” and “on” for “down.”) This rule will work in a vast majority of cases, but like every rule—especially in art—it will be found to admit of many exceptions.

Harmonic Clarity in Pedalling is the Basis, but it is only the basis; it is not all that constitutes an artistic treatment of the pedal. In spite of what I have just said above there are



Photograph by Byron

Incorrect Position of the Feet



Photograph by Byron

Correct Position of the Feet on the Pedal

THE USE OF THE PEDAL

in many pieces moments where a blending of tones, seemingly foreign to one another, is a means of characterisation. This blending is especially permissible when the passing (foreign) tones are more than one octave removed from the lowest tone and from the harmony built upon it. In this connection it should be remembered that the pedal is not merely a means of tone prolongation but also a means of colouring—and pre-eminently that. What is generally understood by the term piano-charm is to the greatest extent produced by an artistic use of the pedal.

For instance, great accent effects can be produced by the gradual accumulating of tone-volume through the pedal and its sudden release on the accented point. The effect is somewhat like that which we hear in the orchestra when a crescendo is supported by a roll of the drum or tympani making the last tap on the accented point. And, as I am mentioning the orchestra, I may illustrate by the French horns another use of the pedal: where the horns do not carry the melody (which they do relatively seldom) they are employed to support sus-

PIANO PLAYING

tained harmonies, and their effect is like a glazing, a binding, a unifying of the various tone-colours of the other instruments. Just such a glazing is produced by the judicious use of the pedal, and when, in the orchestra, the horns cease and the strings proceed alone there ensues a certain soberness of tone which we produce in the piano by the release and non-use of the pedal. In the former instance, while the horns were active they furnished the harmonic background upon which the thematic development of the musical picture proceeded; in the latter case, when the horns cease the background is taken away and the thematic configurations stand out—so to speak—against the sky. Hence, the pedal gives to the piano tone that unifying, glazing, that finish—though this is not exactly the word here—which the horns or softly played trombones give to the orchestra.

But the Pedal Can Do More Than That. At times we can produce strange, glasslike effects by purposely mixing non-harmonic tones. I only need to hint at some of the fine, embroidery-like cadenzas in Chopin's works, like the

THE USE OF THE PEDAL

one in his E-minor Concerto (Andante, measures 101, 102, and 103). Such blendings are productive of a multitude of effects, especially when we add the agency of dynamic gradation: effects suggestive of winds from Zephyr to Boreas, of the splash and roar of waves, of fountain-play, of rustling leaves, etc. This mode of blending can be extended also to entire harmonies in many cases where one fundamental chord is to predominate for some time while other chords may pass in quicker succession while it lasts. In such cases it is by no means imperative to abandon the pedal; we need only to establish various dynamic levels and place the ruling harmony on a higher level than the passing ones. In other words, the predominating chord must receive so much force that it can outlast all those briefer ones which, though audible, must die of their own weakness, and while the strong, ruling chord was constantly disturbed by the weaker ones it also re-established its supremacy with the death of every weaker one which it outlasted. This use of the pedal has its limitations in the evanescent nature of the tone of the piano.

PIANO PLAYING

That moment when the blending of non-harmonic tones imperils the tonal beauty of the piece in hand can be determined solely and exclusively by the player's own ear, and here we are once more at the point from which this article started, namely: that the ear is governor, and that it alone can decide whether or not there is to be any pedal.

It were absurd to assume that we can greatly please the ear of others by our playing so long as our own ear is not completely satisfied. We should, therefore, endeavour to train the susceptibility of our ear, and we should ever make it more difficult to gain the assent of our own ear than to gain that of our auditors. They may, apparently, not notice defects in your playing, but at this juncture I wish to say a word of serious warning: Do not confound unmindfulness with consent! To hear ourselves play—that is, to listen to our own playing—is the bed-rock basis of all music-making and also, of course, of the technic of the pedal. Therefore, listen carefully, attentively to the tones you produce. When you employ the pedal as a prolongation of the fingers (to sus-

THE USE OF THE PEDAL

tain tones beyond the reach of the fingers), see to it that you catch, and hold, the fundamental tone of your chord, for this tone must be always your chief consideration.

Whether You Use the Pedal as a Means of Mere Prolongation or as a medium of colouring, under no circumstances use it as a cloak for imperfection of execution. For, like charity, it is apt to be made to cover a multitude of sins; but, again like charity, who wants to make himself dependent upon it, when honest work can prevent it?

Nor should the pedal be used to make up for a deficiency of force. To produce a forte is the business of the fingers (with or without the aid of the arm) but not of the pedal, and this holds true also—*mutatis mutandis*—of the left pedal, for which the Germans use a word (*Verschiebung*) denoting something like “shifting.” In a “grand” piano the treading of the left pedal shifts the hammers so far to one side that instead of striking three strings they will strike only two. (In the pianos of fifty and more years ago there were only two strings to each tone, and when the hammers were shifted by

PIANO PLAYING

the treading of the left pedal they struck only one string. From those days we have retained the term “*una corda*”—one string.) In an upright piano the lessening of tone-volume is produced by a lessening of the momentum of the hammer stroke.

Now, as the right pedal should not be used to cover a lack of force, so should the left pedal not be regarded as a licence to neglect the formation of a fine *pianissimo* touch. It should not cloak or screen a defective *pianissimo*, but should serve exclusively as a means of colouring where the softness of tone is coupled with what the jewellers call “dull finish.” For the left pedal does not soften the tone without changing its character; it lessens the quantity of tone but at the same time it also markedly affects the quality.

To Sum Up: Train your ear and then use both pedals honestly! Use them for what they were made. Remember that even screens are not used for hiding things behind them, but for decorative purposes or for protection. Those who do use them for hiding something must have something which they prefer to hide!

PLAYING “IN STYLE”

BY playing a piece of music “in style” is understood a rendition which does absolute justice to its contents in regard to the manner of expression. Now, the true manner of expression must be sought and found for each piece individually, even though a number of different pieces may be written by one and the same composer. Our first endeavour should be to search out the peculiarity of the piece in hand rather than that of the composer in general. If you have succeeded in playing one work by Chopin in style, it does not follow, by any means, that you can play equally well any other work from his pen. Though on general lines his manner of writing may be the same in all his works, there will, nevertheless, be marked differences between the various pieces.

Only by careful study of each work by itself can we find the key to its correct conception

PIANO PLAYING

and rendition. We will never find it in books about the composer, nor in such as treat of his works, but only in the works themselves and in each one *per se*. People who study a lot of things about a work of art may possibly enrich their general knowledge, but they never can get that specific knowledge needful for the interpretation of the particular work in hand. Its own contents alone can furnish that knowledge. We know from frequent experience that book-learned musicians (or, as they are now called, musicologists) usually read everything in sight, and yet their playing rises hardly ever above mediocre dilettanteism.

Why should we look for a correct conception of a piece anywhere but in the piece itself? Surely the composer has embodied in the piece all he knew and felt when he wrote it. Why, then, not listen to his specific language instead of losing our way in the terms of another art? Literature is literature, and music is music. They may combine, as in song, but one can never be substituted for the other.

Many Students Never Learn to understand a composer's specific language because their

PLAYING "IN STYLE"

sole concern is to make the piece "effective" in the sense of a clever stunt. This tendency is most deplorable; for there really does exist a specifically musical language. By purely material means: through notes, pauses, dynamic and other signs, through special annotations, etc., the composer encloses in his work the whole world of his imagination. The duty of the interpretative artist is to extract from these material things the spiritual essence and to transmit it to his hearers. To achieve this he must understand this musical language in general and of each composition in particular.

But—how is this language to be learned?

By conning with careful attentiveness—and, of course, absorbing—the purely material matter of a piece: the notes, pauses, time values, dynamic indications, etc.

If a player be scrupulously exact in his mere reading of a piece it will, of itself, lead him to understand a goodly portion of the piece's specific language. Nay, more! Through a really correct conning the player is enabled to determine upon the points of repose as well as upon the matter of climax, and thus to cre-

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ate a basis for the operations of his own imagination. After that, nothing remains but to call forth into tonal life, through the fingers, what his musical intelligence has grasped—which is a purely technical task. To transform the purely technical and material processes into a thing that lives, of course, rests with the natural, emotional, temperamental endowments of the individual; it rests with those many and complex qualities which are usually summarised by the term “talent,” but this must be presupposed with a player who aspires to artistic work.

On the other hand, talent alone cannot lift the veil that hides the spiritual content of a composition if its possessor neglects to examine the latter carefully as to its purely material ingredients. He may flatter the ear, sensuously speaking, but he can never play the piece in style.

Now How Can We Know whether we are or are not approaching the spiritual phase of a piece? By repetition under unremitting attention to the written values. If, then, you should find how much there is still left for you

PLAYING "IN STYLE"

to do, you have proved to yourself that you have understood the piece spiritually and are on the right track to master it. With every repetition you will discover some hitherto unnoticed defect in your interpretation. Obviate these defects, one by one, and in so doing you will come nearer and nearer to the spiritual essence of the work in hand.

As to the remaining "purely technical task" (as I said before), it must not be underestimated! To transmit one's matured conception to one's auditors requires a considerable degree of mechanical skill, and this skill, in its turn, must be under absolute control of the will. Of course—after the foregoing—this does not mean that everybody who has a good and well-controlled technic can interpret a piece in style. Remember that to possess wealth is one thing, to put it to good use is quite another.

It is sometimes said that the too objective study of a piece may impair the "individuality" of its rendition. Have no fear of that! If ten players study the same piece with the same high degree of exactness and objectivity—de-

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pend upon it: each one will still play it quite differently from the nine others, though each one may think his rendition the only correct one. For each one will express what, according to his lights, he has mentally and temperamentally absorbed. Of the distinctive feature which constitutes the difference in the ten conceptions each one will have been unconscious while it formed itself, and perhaps also afterward. But it is just this unconsciously formed feature which constitutes legitimate individuality and which alone will admit of a real fusion of the composer's and the interpreter's thought. A purposed, blatant parading of the player's dear self through wilful additions of nuances, shadings, effects, and what not, is tantamount to a falsification; at best it is "playing to the galleries," charlatanism. The player should always feel convinced that he plays only what is written. To the auditor, who with his own and different intelligence follows the player's performance, the piece will appear in the light of the player's individuality. The stronger this is the more it will colour the performance, when unconsciously admixed.

PLAYING "IN STYLE"

Rubinstein Often Said to Me: "Just play first exactly what is written; if you have done full justice to it and then still feel like adding or changing anything, why, do so." Mind well: after you have done full justice to what is written! How few are those who fulfil this duty! I venture to prove to any one who will play for me—if he be at all worth listening to—that he does not play more than is written (as he may think), but, in fact, a good deal less than the printed page reveals. And this is one of the principal causes of misunderstanding the esoteric portion, the inherent "style" of a piece—a misunderstanding which is not always confined to amateurs—inexact reading!

The true interpretation of a piece of music results from a correct understanding of it, and this, in turn, depends solely upon scrupulously exact reading.

Learn the Language of Music, then, I repeat, through exact reading! You will then soon fathom the musical meaning of a composition and transmit it intelligibly to your listeners. Would you satisfy your curiosity as to what manner of person the author is or was at

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the time of writing, you may do so. But—as I said in the “Foreword”—your chief interest should centre in the “composition,” not in the “composer,” for only by studying his work will you be enabled to play it in style.



Anton Rubinstein

HOW RUBINSTEIN TAUGHT ME TO PLAY

OUTSIDE of the regular students of the Imperial Conservatory of Music at St. Petersburg, Rubinstein accepted but one pupil. The advantage and privilege to be that one pupil was mine.

I came to Rubinstein when I was sixteen years old and left him at eighteen. Since that time I have studied only by myself; for to whom could I have gone after Rubinstein? His very manner of teaching was such that it would have made any other teacher appear to me like a schoolmaster. He chose the method of indirect instruction through suggestive comparisons. He touched upon the strictly musical only upon rare occasions. In this way he wished to awaken within me the concretely musical as a parallel of his generalisations and thereby preserve my musical individuality.

He never played for me. He only talked,

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and I, understanding him, translated his meaning into music and musical utterances. Sometimes, for instance, when I played the same phrase twice in succession, and played it both times alike (say in a sequence), he would say: "In fine weather you may play it as you did, but when it rains play it differently."

Rubinstein was much given to whims and moods, and he often grew enthusiastic about a certain conception only to prefer a different one the next day. Yet he was always logical in his art, and though he aimed at hitting the nail from various points of view he always hit it on the head. Thus he never permitted me to bring to him, as a lesson, any composition more than once. He explained this to me once by saying that he might forget in the next lesson what he told me in the previous one, and by drawing an entirely new picture only confuse my mind. Nor did he ever permit me to bring one of his own works, though he never explained to me his reason for this singular attitude.

Usually, when I came to him, arriving from Berlin, where I lived, I found him seated at

HOW RUBINSTEIN TAUGHT

his writing-desk, smoking Russian cigarettes. He lived at the Hôtel de l'Europe. After a kindly salute he would always ask me the same question: "Well, what is new in the world?"

I remember replying to him: "I know nothing new; that's why I came to learn something new—from you."

Rubinstein, understanding at once the musical meaning of my words, smiled, and the lesson thus promised to be a fine one.

I noticed he was usually not alone when I came, but had as visitors several elderly ladies, sometimes very old ladies (mostly Russians), and some young girls—seldom any men. With a wave of his hand he directed me to the piano in the corner, a Bechstein, which was most of the time shockingly out of tune; but to this condition of his piano he was always serenely indifferent. He would remain at his desk studying the notes of the work while I played. He always compelled me to bring the pieces along, insisting that I should play everything just as it was written! He would follow every note of my playing with his eyes riveted on the printed pages. A pedant he certainly was, a stickler for

PIANO PLAYING

the letter—incredibly so, especially when one considered the liberties he took when he played the same works! Once I called his attention modestly to this seeming paradox, and he answered: “When you are as old as I am now you may do as I do—if you can.”

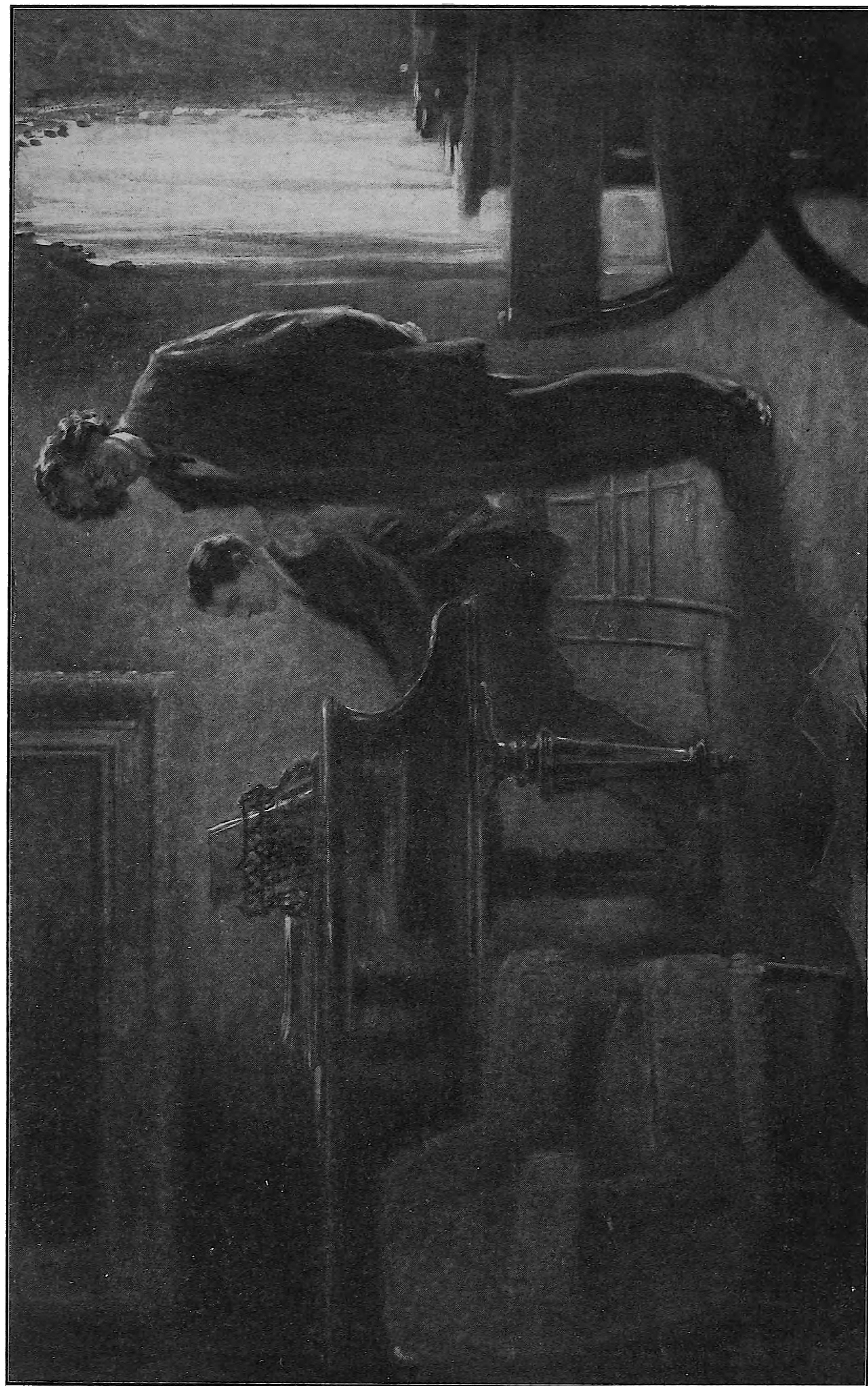
Once I played a Liszt Rhapsody pretty badly. After a few moments he said: “The way you played this piece would be all right for auntie or mamma.” Then rising and coming toward me he would say: “Now let us see how we play such things.” Then I would begin all over again, but hardly had I played a few measures when he would interrupt and say: “Did you start? I thought I hadn’t heard right——”

“Yes, master, I certainly did,” I would reply.

“Oh,” he would say vaguely. “I didn’t notice.”

“How do you mean?” I would ask.

“I mean this,” he would answer: “Before your fingers touch the keys you must begin the piece mentally—that is, you must have settled in your mind the *tempo*, the manner of touch,



How Rubinstein Taught Me to Play

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and, above all, the attack of the first notes, before your actual playing begins. And by-the-by, what is the character of this piece? Is it dramatic, tragic, lyric, romantic, humourous, heroic, sublime, mystic—what? Well, why don't you speak?"

Generally I would mutter something after such a tirade, but usually I said something stupid because of the awe with which he inspired me. Finally, after trying several of his suggested designations I would hit it right. Then he would say: "Well, there we are at last! Humourous, is it? Very well! And rhapsodical, irregular—hey? You understand the meaning?" I would answer, "Yes."

"Very well, then," he would reply; "now prove it." And then I would begin all over again.

He would stand at my side, and whenever he wanted a special stress laid upon a certain note his powerful fingers would press upon my left shoulder with such force that I would stab the keys till the piano fairly screamed for me. When this did not have the effect he was after he would simply press his whole hand upon

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mine, flattening it out and spreading it like butter all over the keys, black and white ones, creating a frightful cacophony. Then he would say, almost with anger, "But cleaner, cleaner, cleaner," as if the discord had been of my doing.

Such occurrences did not lack a humourous side, but their turn into the tragical always hung by a hair, especially if I had tried to explain or to make excuses. So I generally kept silent, and I found, after some experience, that was the only proper thing for me to do. For just as quickly as he would flare up he would also calm down again, and when the piece was ended I would hear his usual comment: "You are an excellent young man!" And how quickly was all pain then forgotten!

I remember on one occasion that I played Schubert-Liszt's "Erl-König." When I came to the place in the composition where the Erl-King says to the child, "Thou dear, sweet child, oh, come with me," and I had played several false notes besides very poor arpeggios, Rubinstein asked me: "Do you know the text at this place?"

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As a reply I quoted the words.

“Very well, then,” he said, “the Erl-King addresses the child; Erl-King is a spirit, a ghost—so play this place in a spiritlike way, ghostly, if you will, but not ghastly with false notes!”

I had to laugh at his word-play and Rubinstein himself chimed in, and the piece was saved, or rather the player. For when I repeated that particular part it went very well, and he allowed me to continue without further interruption.

Once I asked him for the fingering of a rather complex passage.

“Play it with your nose,” he replied, “but make it sound well!”

This remark puzzled me, and there I sat and wondered what he meant.

As I understand it now he meant: Help yourself! The Lord helps those who help themselves!

As I said before, Rubinstein never played for me the works I had to study. He explained, analysed, elucidated everything that he wanted me to know; but, this done, he left me to my

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own judgment, for only then, he would explain, would my achievement be my own and incontestable property. I learned from Rubinstein in this way the valuable truth that the conception of tone-pictures obtained through the playing of another gives us only transient impressions; they come and go, while the self-created conception will last and remain our own.

Now, when I look back upon my study-days with Rubinstein, I can see that he did not so much instruct me as that I learned from him. He was not a pedagogue in the usual meaning of that word. He indicated to me an altitude offering a fine view, but how I was to get up there was my affair; he did not bother about it. "Play with your nose!" Yes—but when I bumped it till it fairly bled where would I get the metaphorical handkerchief? In my imagination! And he was right.

To be sure, this method would not work with all pupils, but it is nevertheless well calculated to develop a student's original thought and bring out whatever acumen he may possess. If such a one succeeded by his own study and

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mental force to reach the desired point which the great magician's wizardry had made him see, he had gained the reliance in his own strength: he felt sure that he would always find that point again—even though he should lose his way once or twice, as every one with an honest aspiration is liable to do.

I recall that Rubinstein once said to me: “Do you know why piano-playing is so difficult? Because it is prone to be either affected or else afflicted with mannerisms; and when these two pitfalls are luckily avoided then it is liable to be—dry! The truth lies between those three mischiefs!”

When it was settled that I should make my Hamburg début under his baton with his own D-minor Concerto, I thought the time had come at last to study with him one of his own works. So I proposed it, but Rubinstein disposed of it! I still see him, as if it were but yesterday, seated in the greenroom of the Berlin Philharmonic during an intermission in his concert (it was on a Saturday) and telling me: “We shall appear together in Hamburg on Monday.” The time was short, but I knew the

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Concerto and hoped to go through it with him some time in the remaining two days. I asked his permission to play the Concerto for him, but he declined my urgent request, saying: "It is not necessary; we understand each other!" And even in this critical moment he left me to my own resources. After the last (and only) rehearsal the great master embraced me before the whole orchestra, and I—well, I was not in the seventh, but in the "eighth" heaven! Everything was all right, I said to myself, for Rubinstein, Rubinstein was satisfied! The public simply had to be! The concert went off splendidly.

After that memorable début in Hamburg, which was on March 14, 1894, I went directly to see Rubinstein, little dreaming that my eyes would then see him for the last time. I brought with me a large photograph of himself, and, though fully aware of his unconquerable aversion to autographing, my desire for the possession of his signature overruled my reluctance and I made my request.

He raised both fists and thundered, half-angry and half-laughing: "*Et tu, Brute?*"

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But my wish was granted, and I reproduce the portrait in this article.

Then I asked him when I should play for him again, and to my consternation he answered: "Never!"

In my despair I asked him: "Why not?"

He, generous soul that he was, then said to me: "My dear boy, I have told you all I know about legitimate piano-playing and music-making"—and then changing his tone somewhat he added: "And if you don't know it *yet*, why, go to the devil!"

I saw only too well that while he smiled as he said it he meant it seriously, and I left him.

I never saw Rubinstein again. Soon after that he returned to his villa in Peterhof, near St. Petersburg, and there he died on November 19, 1894.

The effect that his death had upon me I shall never forget. The world appeared suddenly entirely empty to me, devoid of any interest. My grief made me realise how my heart had worshipped not only the artist in him but also the man; how I loved him as if he were my father. I learned of his death through the Eng-

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lish papers while I was *en route* from London to Cheltenham, where I was booked for a recital on the twentieth. The B-flat minor Sonata by Chopin happened to be on the programme, and as I struck the first notes of the Funeral March the whole audience rose from their seats as if by command and remained standing with bowed heads during the whole piece—in honour of the great departed.

A singular coincidence occurred at my concert on the preceding day—the day of Rubinstein's death.

On this day I played for the first time in public after my seven years' retirement (excepting my Hamburg début). It was in London. In this concert I played, as a novelty, a Polonaise in E-flat minor which Rubinstein had but recently written in Dresden and dedicated to me. He had included it in the set called "Souvenirs de Dresde." This piece has throughout the character of a Funeral March in all but the time-division. Little did I dream while I was playing it that day that I was singing him into his eternal rest, for it was but a few hours later that, in the far East of Europe,

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my great master passed away, suddenly, of heart failure.

Two years later I played this same Polonaise for the second and last time. It was on the anniversary of his death, in St. Petersburg, where in honour of his memory I gave a recital, the proceeds of which I devoted to the Rubinstein Fund. Since then I have played this piece only once, at home and to myself, excluding it entirely from my public *répertoire*. For, though it was dedicated to me, the time and circumstances of its initial performance always made me feel as if it still belonged to my master, or, at best, as if it were something personal and private between us two.

THE END